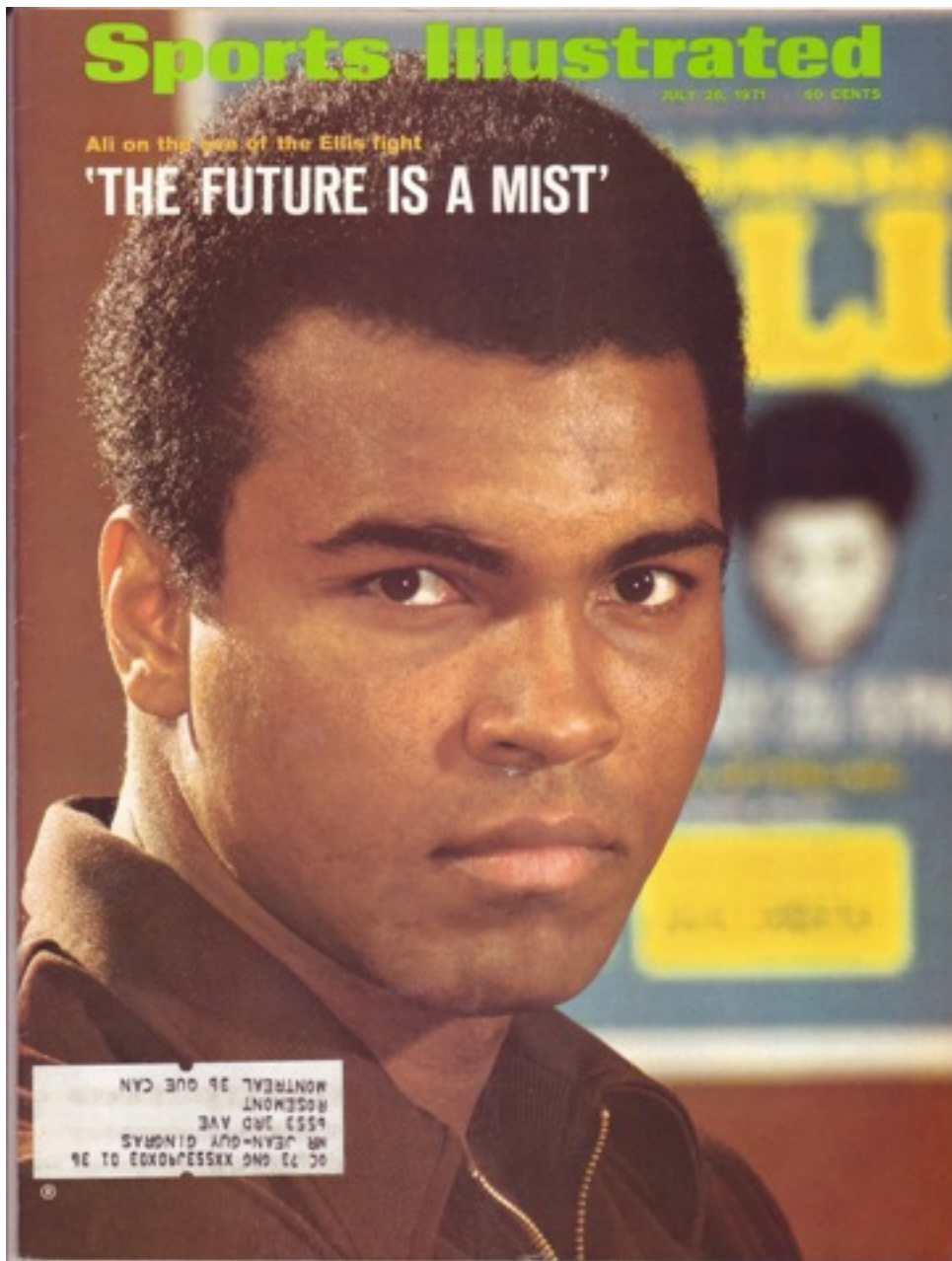


As Ali Turns 70, A Reflection On A First Encounter With The Greatest...LOTIERZO

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 17 January 2012 09:50



On April 19, 1971, a little over five weeks after he lost a unanimous decision to "Smokin" Joe Frazier for the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world, Muhammad Ali's appeal of his conviction for refusing to be inducted into the US military during the Vietnam war was argued before the Supreme Court. On June 28, 1971 the court ruled in Ali's favor 8-0 and reversed the conviction. Muhammad Ali won the biggest fight of his life outside the boxing ring.

During the quickly assembled press conference after the ruling, the first question Ali was asked was whether or not he was going to sue the government for wrongly stripping him of his heavyweight title. Ali immediately responded, "No." And he went on to say that the fight was over and that he held no malice towards anyone. The government did what it believed in and

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thought was right just as he took a stand in doing what he believed in and thought was right.

Think about that for a moment. Ali wasn't about trying to gain some sort of restitution or revenge from the entity that robbed him of his physical prime as a fighter and cost him millions in earnings. And in reality part of the reason why Ali's health isn't as good as it could be today is because he tried to make up the lost millions from his three and a half year exile on the back-end of his career. Thus he endured punishment as an older fighter in his late thirties. Yet he walked away from his fight and struggle with the government with a clear head and didn't live the rest of his life as a bitter or damaged man.

We should've grasped it right then and there, and perhaps some of us did, how big a man Muhammad Ali is and has always been. Sure, like everyone else he has his warts and perhaps went overboard with his pre-fight antics before his title bouts with Floyd Patterson, Ernie Terrell and Joe Frazier. But that aside, Ali has always seen the big picture and has never been the least bit petty or small minded on serious issues that matter.

Muhammad Ali was born January 17, 1942. Today he turns 70 years old. What's left to be said about him that hasn't already been documented? Ali's life in and out of the ring has been covered so much to the point that it's been exhausted. Instead of trying to find something to say about his career or the influence he's had world-wide as a humanitarian since he retired as a fighter that hasn't already been said, I thought I'd share a true story about my first encounter with "The Greatest."

It was late April of 1971, I was in 6th grade and lived in Haddonfield, New Jersey, (20 minutes outside of Philadelphia where heavyweight champ Joe Frazier resided), which is the neighboring town of Cherry Hill where Muhammad Ali moved to in 1970. He lived on Ann Drive off of Kresson Road about 8 miles from my house. I was warned by my father numerous times that I was forbidden to ride my bike that far out to Ali's house hoping to meet him. Yeah, like that was gonna stop me!

On this Saturday afternoon in late April of 1971 I talked a friend of mine, Bob Arnold, into riding our bikes out to Ali's house with the hopes of meeting him. Bob wasn't much of a boxing fan but meeting Ali convinced him to take the excursion. On the way there Bob and I debated whether or not he was gonna be home. Once we arrived it was obvious that no one was there and the trip was for naught.

Just as we were starting to ride away I got a flat on the back tire of my Schwinn Apple Crate, which put me in a dilemma because I now had to call my father and ask him to come and pick

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me up. So I knocked at Ali's next door neighbor's door and asked if I could use the phone to call my father. They were very accommodating and said they were used to people driving by looking to get a glimpse of Ali. When I called my father, he asked me exactly where I was calling from. I hemmed and hawed. Finally, he asked if I had gone to Muhammad Ali's house, and I said yes. He replied, "Instead of giving you a beating, walk your bike home or go asked Muhammad to give you a ride," and then hung up. So I walked my bike home but didn't get an ass whipping from my father when I got there.

Seven months later and two weeks after Ali fought Buster Mathis, I talked three friends, Joe Carbone, Jimmy Avery and Danny Till, into cutting school and going out to Ali's house. This time it was worth the trip. When we approached Ali's house he was outside raking. He caught us staring at him and motioned us to approach the gate by the entrance of his driveway. When we got there he opened the gate and told us to come in. Once we were on his property, he smiled at us and asked, "You guys skipped school to come out here, didn't you?" "Yes," we replied. He then said, "What school do you go to because I have to call your truant officer and tell him that you're here." And then he smiled and asked if we were thirsty and we said yes. He then took us down to a lower level of the house to which half the room was surrounded by a bar and fountain. Ali then said, "I have any kind of soda you want."

After we told him what kind of soda we wanted his wife, Belinda, came down stairs and told him that the drapery man was there and they had to decide on what color they wanted. And by the way the conversation unfolded between them, it sounded as if there was a conflict between the colors red and purple. Ali excused himself from us for a second and said he had to straighten out his wife. He then joined her in a mildly heated debate which was hard to decipher what exactly was being said. After a couple minutes of banter, Belinda walked away from him saying, "That's it Muhammad, I'm going with our first choice. If you don't like it, tough. Don't give me a hard time or I'll go call Joe. He's right across the bridge." After hearing that Ali had the look on his face as if he were a little kid and had his hand caught in the cookie jar.

For the next 15 or so minutes Ali chatted with us and asked what we were studying in school and what our parents did as an occupation. Shortly after that he said he had to go and asked us to follow him to the gate so he could see us out. As we were leaving he said, "The next time we come around during a school day I'm going to report you to your school for playing hooky." He then waved and went back towards the house.

Years later when I was with him at the 20th anniversary celebration of Frazier-Ali I in Center City Philadelphia, I told him the story and he asked if his old house in Cherry Hill was still there. I told him that it was but it was no longer the nicest house on the street. He laughed.

It's inconceivable that you'd be able to do that with any elite athlete today, let alone hands down the most famous. And it's strange, because Muhammad Ali pretty much set the stage for today's self absorbed super stars, yet he never distanced himself from anyone. And I'm sure that, were his health good, he'd be exactly the way he was back then now when it came to access.

Contact Lotierzo at GlovedFist@Gmail.com "

[Comment on this article](#)

Coxs Corner says:

Nice read.

Robert Curtis says:

Ali is the greatest. He took punches from a murderer's row of challengers like no other heavyweight ever: from Foreman, Shavers, Frazier, etc. However, I have to say he is a draft dodger. Ali just did not want to serve. The muslim/moral argument was bogus. How does a guy who punches people's skulls for a living have a moral or religious objection to combat? That's silly. Also, Frazier beat him TWICE. Look at the tape of the 2nd fight. Ali grabbed Joe's head so many times it was shameless and disgusting and should have gotten Ali disqualified. Although Ali did beat Frazier in a big, high risk way in Manilla.

Radam G says:

You are just WRONG, Bobby C. Grabbing a head is not grounds for a DQ. It is called clinching and is allowed. You are apparented spoiled by umpteen incompetent of nowadays referees who don't know syet and make up jive on da fly.

Now you are going straight-up hating in this Bobby C reversing jive tirade. Hehehehe! GOAT Ali beat the late, great Smokin' Joe Frazier twice, officially. It is just as Da Manny beat crybaby bytch Marquez actually three times, but twice officially. Thank God that you can just bytch, insteading of changing stuff. You will probably change the sun to rising in the north and sitting in the south.

Holla at fights on Youtube that go all the way back to the 1890s and observed the grabbing behind the head. Jack Johnson grabbed Tommy Burns and Jim Jeffries behind the heads so much that it looked like he was trying to get on a hand lynching. Holla!

brownsugar says:

That's the stuff that inspires dreams, excellent retelling of a precious pre-pubescent moment with the king. I love these kinds of articles.

Topspot 58 says:

Disagree with Curtis

How many people did Ali kill in the ring ? How do you know his heart ? Here are 2 quotes from the Greatest. "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong... no Vietcong ever called me nigger." "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam While so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated

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like dogs and denied simple human rights ?" He was arrested and found guilty of draft evasion charges; he was stripped of his boxing title and his boxing license was suspended. He did not fight for 4 years as his appeal worked itself to the Supreme Court, where it was successful. The vote by the 8 Supreme Court Justices was 8-0. Ali never sued for lost earnings. Curtis knows better than 8 Supreme Court Justices.